

Funnel for Soviet dissent

By Takashi Oka

Amsterdam

In an immaculate white stone house overlooking historic Amstel Canal sits a shirt-sleeved professor whom Soviet propaganda has labeled "one of the most energetic agents of the CIA."

The appellation amuses Dr. Karel Van Het Reve, a tall, well-built man with a sly sense of humor and hands that seem more at home painting or scraping the sides of a boat than leafing through the pages of scholarly books on his specialty — modern Russian literature.

"In 20 years' time, I think Russia will be as free a country as Spain is today," the professor said. "The first Soviet edition of 'Doctor Zhivago' should be coming out in 1985 — no, perhaps 1990."

If the outside world today hears and reads more about dissent in the Soviet Union than in years past — not only by literary giants like Alexander Solzhenitsyn or the late Boris Pasternak, but by a growing group of talented younger writers and even by ordinary citizens — it is due at least in part to the quiet work of people like Professor Van Het Reve and his colleagues of the Alexander Herzen Foundation.

Records of trials

It is the Herzen Foundation, and before its establishment in 1969, Professor Van Het Reve himself, who brought manuscripts by Anatoly Marchenko, Andrei Amalrik, Pavel Litvinov, the eminent physicist Andrei Sakharov, and a host of others, to the attention of Western publishers.

It is the Herzen Foundation that continues to publish works of documentary value, even if they are not commercially viable, such as the voluminous records of court trials of Soviet dissidents, or the irregularly published chronicle of events listing in detail cases of official violations of human rights.

Dissenters in the Soviet Union are a tiny, courageous group, and they seem to have managed to keep in communication with each other and to get their story out to the West in spite of every official effort to discover and eliminate their contacts with the outside world.

Frequently they are not anti-Communists in the old-fashioned political sense, but idealists who demand that the government and Communist Party honor the rules regarding political, religious, and other freedoms they themselves have enshrined as the law of the land.

Shoestring operation

Professor Van Het Reve and his colleagues — Prof. Jan Willem Bezemer of Amsterdam University, Peter Reddaway of the London School of Economics, and Elizabeth Fisher, "our indefatigable literary agent" — run a shoestring operation. No one on the Herzen Foundation receives any salary or even expenses.

Their manuscripts reach them in a variety of ways — often brought out by complete strangers who have somehow been entrusted with the task. The modest royalties they collect on commercially viable books are held in bank accounts for the authors, with a small percentage going for publication costs on noncommercial manuscripts.

The Herzen Foundation's particular competence is in editing and publishing the original Russian texts of manuscripts, in order to protect the author's rights. As meticulous, dedicated scholars without commercial interests or political axes to grind, Professor Van Het Reve feels that he and his colleagues are better equipped to do this job than various Russian émigré organizations, or commercial publishing firms lacking technical expertise in the Russian language.

Professors Van Het Reve, Bezemer, and Reddaway founded the Herzen Foundation in May, 1969. Alexander Herzen was a renowned intellectual and writer of the 19th century who was exiled to Britain by Czar Nicholas I and who there published a steady stream of books and articles of czarist censorship, many of the manuscripts having been smuggled out to him from Russia itself.

His own 'Kronstadt'

By ironic coincidence, the house at 268 Amstel where Professor Van Het Reve lives with his wife, Josina, also a Russian specialist, and where the Herzen Foundation is housed used to be the headquarters of the Dutch Communist Party in the years before World War II, while just across the canal stood the offices of the Communist Party newspaper where Dr. Van Het Reve's father worked for many years until his sudden, unaccountable expulsion in 1940.

Professor Van Het Reve cannot remember exactly when or how he himself became disillusioned by communism. "Everyone has his own Kronstadt [referring to a mutiny soon after the Bolshevik Revolution which disillusioned many early Communists]. I can't tell you when mine was. I took up Soviet studies after getting interested in modern Russian literature, and no one can continue such studies for long without ceasing to be a believer. There are just too many contradictions."

But the professor is no cold warrior. There is, indeed, a curious innocence about him — an openness, a completely unconspiratorial manner, which is what probably gave Soviet dissidents confidence in him when he first came across them at the trial of one of them, Vladimir Bukovsky, in Moscow in 1967.

Police avoided

He was on a year's leave of absence from his chair of Russian studies at the University of Leyden, and had decided to take it in Moscow as a correspondent for the liberal Dutch newspaper Het Parool. He went to the supposedly open trial in September along with other Western correspondents and saw how Soviet KGB agents harassed friends of the accused.

His sympathies engaged, he met various young dissidents from time to time, keeping the Soviet police off his track because he also had a circle of ordinary Soviet friends with whom he kept up normal relations.

"I used the telephone as little as possible," he recalled. "Each time I met a friend, I would make an appointment orally."

An occasional gem

But he also started translating manuscripts he found interesting. He even called his Dutch publisher from Moscow about one referring to it as his work on "Letters to Lenin."

In August, 1968, he returned to Amsterdam with a suitcase figuratively bulging with manuscripts (actually most had been sent out of Moscow earlier, in one way or another) "and since then, they've never stopped coming."

Some, of course, are of indifferent value. Others, as with Nadezhda Mandelstam's moving autobiography, "Hope Against Hope," are gems. (The manuscript also reached the West through another channel and was brought out by a commercial publisher.)

It is a lonely, isolated group, these dissidents with not much more than their ideal to sustain them. But thanks to their own courage and persistence and to the response of friends outside their own land like the Herzen Foundation, they are managing to avoid the worst fate—ablivion.

"Even in Russia," Dr. Van Het Reve says, "people who had never heard of dissident literature three or four years ago, today are aware it exists. They may even have read some of it. That is not much, but at least is something."